

9. From *Memories of a Southern Sojourn* by Erston M. Butterfield, unpublished manuscript, October 2001

In the Spring of 1952, Dr. Thomas Tripp (1895-1954), Director of Town and Country Work (AUTHOR'S NOTE: for the Congregational Christian Churches), called to see if we might be interested in the Southeast Convention, composed of 127 White churches in six states practicing segregation—Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and the Panhandle of Florida. The answer was an emphatic “No!” Go South? No way!

Soon after, Dr. Stanley U. North, General Secretary of the Division of Church Extension and Evangelism, called telling of needs and urging consideration of a move to the South. Again “No” was the reply. The South, its culture and traditions, were foreign to us and we had no desire to move from (southwestern) Ohio.

Then came a call from the Executive Vice President of the Board of Home Missions, Dr. Truman B. Douglass. Somehow, one didn’t say “No” to (him) ...

I flew down to meet with the Board. (I was) met at the Atlanta airport by Montez Albright, the office secretary ...

The Board gathered at Central Church was most impressive. Lay persons and ministers alike spoke of a changing culture in a growing South. I was caught up in their descriptions of the New South and wanted to be part of the adventure! All was so positive and congenial; all doubts were erased.

... So how does one get acquainted with 127 churches (9,658 all White members) spread over parts of 6 states and served by 111 ministers? I thought it could be done the first year!

... The Southeast Convention was a new union of the Congregational Christian Churches of the deep South. It was organized in 1949 after the pattern of the Southern Convention of the Congregational Christian Churches ...

... The average country congregation numbered 34. In metropolitan areas we did better: Birmingham Pilgrim accounted for 230, Pilgrim in Chattanooga listed 318 and Atlanta Central had 586 members.

... Of the 127 churches, 76 might be classified as "rural," 45 as "town," and only six as "city" ...

... Asked where the rural churches were located, the standard answer was, "Three miles out of town and three miles back in the woods." A joke, yes, but too true! A number of these churches were "liberal" theologically as well as politically, but others had become like their Southern Baptist neighbors.

Many rural churches were in "Yoked Parishes" served by lay or licensed preachers. Some of the "Yoked Parishes" had fully trained ministers, who provided outstanding leadership in the Southeast Convention.

Mathematically we were well balanced: One third of the ministers serving churches had seminary or college degrees. A third had high school training. One third had completed grade school. All were thoroughly dedicated to the ministry!

... Filling vacant pulpits was always a problem. Few northern ministers, even missionary minded ones, could accept the idea of even considering a segregated church in the segregated Southeast Convention. "Do-gooders" had a rough time and soon returned North. Were it not for the upward mobility of local ministers, Pastoral Placement would have been a very difficult task.

... (One) unfortunate conflict was with Warner Carpenter of South Georgia. Although not having any seminary training, he acted like the Bishop of South Georgia. Many of the churches in the South Georgia Association looked to him for guidance.

In the early years of my stay, Warner often surprised me and the Board of Directors with his willingness to support Convention programs. His help in the "Day of Decision" effort was invaluable. He began the "Church Builders Club" and saw that all funds were used for building projects around the Convention.

But, he was also attuned to the "anti-merger" group, and at times circulated false rumors among the churches. Often, it was necessary to rebut his unfounded fears and letters to Convention churches.

Then came the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and everything changed. No longer was I the "fair-haired boy" in Atlanta but the "damn Yankee from Ohio!"

... Something needs to be said about the Convention of the South ... The Rev. J. Taylor Stanley, a very able African-American, was the Superintendent and Registrar of 215 congregations scattered over 12 states ... Our paths seldom crossed, but I remember one day in 1955. Our schedules took us both to Alabama. He to First (Congregational Church), Birmingham, me to a rural church west of the city. Since we always tried to work in several appointments each trip, we met on the streets of Birmingham.

After a few comments about the weather, our conversation went something like: "Hey, let's have lunch together!" "Oh, Erston, you know we can't do that! They'd lynch us for sure!" "Not here in the city, but at that little roadside park on the outskirts of town ..." "I'll get the food, you just meet me there in 20 minutes," "O.K., I'll be there!" was his daring reply. So, off we went. I picked up sandwiches and drinks for both of us at a dime store ... and headed for our rendezvous. Taylor was waiting, and no one bothered us as we ate our agape lunch under God's blue sky!

... Most ministers and congregations remained true to the Congregational Christian beliefs in the Fatherhood [sic] of God and the Brotherhood of Man, but many of our White brothers [sic] didn't want to get involved in "the controversy."

This does not mean that all took this way out. There were some ministers and lay persons who spoke out forcefully for racial justice. I had the full backing of the Board of Directors and many congregations. But, the "right of private judgment" and the "autonomy of the local church" were often used as a shield against local criticism.

I received fewer invitations to visit racially conservative congregations and unhappy events began to occur. Some qualified as "harassment" ...

... There were two good routes I liked to take when visiting congregations in Alabama. One was through Columbus, Georgia, and the other through Anniston, Alabama. For a while after the (*Brown v. Board*) decision (before getting smart and taking other routes), I could expect an escort (one or more cars) through the counties. How did they know my schedule and my car? I had suspicions.

Only once did such harassment warrant a report to city authorities. After a meeting at one of our rural churches, the drive home through Anniston took a menacing turn.

At the edge of the city, two pickups pulled in back of me. They were following too closely and apparently had no intent of passing but only to intimidate. A third pickup passed the two and threw a blazing cross which hit my windshield and bounced off

into a field. With vision impaired, I ended up in the ditch. Needless to say, I was discombobulated as the three pickups disappeared down the road.

The cross had done no real damage, and soon a passing truck stopped, got me back on the road, and told how to get to the city police station ...

One day, when attending an Association meeting in South Georgia, someone placed an *Atlanta Journal* in my car. Scrawled in red lipstick on the front page were the words of advice: "(racial expletive) Lover — Go Home." Dr. Thomas Anderson, one of the speakers that day, made a big thing of the event and reported it to the whole gathering. All expressed their anger and assured us that only an outsider could have done such a thing.

Then, one time, someone wrote to all the ministers of the South Alabama-Northwest Florida Association not to send their young people to summer camp because there were to be (Blacks) present. (I think that was when Millard Fuller was President of Pilgrim Fellowship.) Anyway, as far as could be determined, no minister followed the advice, and the camp was a success.

... In the summer of 1956, the Kentucky/Tennessee Conference held its first desegregated "Family Camp." Only one Black family attended, but we were "interracial"—a first for the C.C. churches of the South!

... My older daughter remembers that it rained most of the week, that it was fun playing with the Black minister's children, that the comic dramas of "Skit Night" were great, and that we had a special missionary visitor from India ...

... In the months that followed, the larger city churches began to face up to a culture which now demanded "integration" of the races. They found it easier to convince their people on legal rather than theological grounds. The Supreme Court had ruled, and they must now obey the law. Some ministers, like Arnold Slater of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Chattanooga, held interracial meetings and stressed justice, peace and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These were difficult days for our churches in the South, but most were a part of the new day aborning.